

Gerry Smith
and
Bernhard Huwiler

"D" is for Drawing

E. P. Phister interviewed Gerry Smith and Bernhard Huwiler in July of 1997 on the Sears Tower Observation Deck in Chicago. E. P. Phister is a curator at the Institute of Visionary Drawings in Reno, Nevada.



E. P. Phister: Which one of the two of you chose this place to be interviewed?

Bernhard Huwiler: Well, I did. Now, the last few years that I have lived in the Midwest I've become a bit afraid of heights, and I thought that if I scared myself to death I might be more concerned about throwing up than about this interview.
(Laughs)

Gerry Smith: Always the dare-devil. You can imagine what it must be like to work with him on a regular basis. I feel like a pig in poop up here being the voyeur that I am..

BH: But, I imagine that you would rather be the eye of a satellite.

GS: The Hubble telescope of course! I heard that it was pointed at Earth for awhile before it received its correction lens. What do you think those guys were looking at?



EPP: Hmm...Tell me, what is more important to you...to look or to be looked at? I mean, it is amazing to be up here looking down at the world...everything is so...abstract, for lack of a better word. But you guys have spent your efforts making drawings on the ground that are intended to be looked at from space.



GS: It's not an issue of one position being more important than another. Of course, it would be ideal to have ready access to the aerial viewing platforms that we know are recording our drawings...surveillance planes, reconnaissance satellites and the like. And we have flown over several of our drawings to see how they look. But, for the most part, we concern ourselves with what we can do, and like to do...and that is to make our



EPP: Perhaps I should start by asking you about a drawing you recently did here in Chicago. As I understand it, you used a newly discovered city plan of Chicago that was created around the turn of the century and was based on the ideas of Baron Hausmann, Napoleon III's chief architect and principle visionary for the re-design of Paris. You used this old city plan of Chicago as a template over a map to the area surrounding the University of Chicago and parts west. Then you drew the streets, plazas, etc. in full scale on the ground using your drawing "machine." Tell me about this.



GS: That is partly accurate. What is great about this visionary plan is that the author, Everet T. Horke, wanted to create a second city in what eventually became South Chicago. For him it was to be an ideal city with all of the attributes of Hausmann's Paris plans...a city of easy access with broad boulevards and all. It made for a city where the inhabitants could be easily watched, and easily controlled. The Situationists, in some of their mapping projects, had this idea too--you know...to demonstrate that city plans are often articulations of centralized power and control.



BH: This was a cool drawing to make. Can you imagine what might have become of South Chicago had this plan been implemented?

EPP: Wasn't this a difficult and dangerous project? South Chicago would not be my first choice for a place to walk around with a bag of sand and a video camera on a stick.

BH: Sure. We have done drawings in gated communities, too. But, in this whole drawing project we want to interface with all sectors of society. Each one presents different complications.

EPP: Like what?

BH: Well, after less than five minutes into our drawing in Brentwood [Los Angeles], we were surrounded by private security guards and escorted rudely right back to our cars. No...how do you call it...monkey business with those guys. (Laughs) This stopped what would have been a terrific drawing

of O.J.'s Heisman Trophy. In contrast, south Chicago has local security that comes in the shape of 12 year old gangsters. We should have hired security guards for ourselves! Crossing someone's yard with our blue line raised hell at times.

GS: In other respects, it differs little whether you are being bitten by a pure breed or a mutt. I've got two scars from each, right here and here, and both hurt about the same. Some things are the same no matter whose neighbourhood you're in. Besides, nearly everyone complains to us about what we are doing. "I don't like the mess you are making on my sidewalk."

BH: "Is that stuff radioactive?" Or, "You're trespassing on my property...get the fuck off!"

GS: And, we do need to trespass at times to stay on track with our drawing plan. But most people understand that this is art.

EPP: So your project is about people...people on the street, cops, thugs, angry property owners...the curious...everybody that watches you?

BH: No. Our project is about drawing. But a drawing can never be looked at without its context. In our drawings we have a heightened awareness of context...we are in an interactive community theater of sorts. So it is in every drawing, the pencil and the image are in a dynamic relationship with the surroundings. We cannot control what exactly will happen. And this is not only the result of social or political interactions. For example, with our planned drawing on Mars on July 4, we had, unfortunately, technical problems--NASA didn't accept our proposal. We wanted the Pathfinder to have an opening that would have twinkled our blue sand onto the ground in a precise way. It is unfortunate that you cannot see the nice little drawing we had programmed for this foreign planet.

EPP without: What? I would have liked to have seen that!

GS: Me too. But, we will soon try again with another proposal.

EPP: You have used the term "Performance Drawing" to describe your work. Could you elaborate on this concept?

GS: We are really doing nothing very different than anyone who marks up a paper with a pencil. It is a very simple thing. We differ in that we are using the landscape or city scape or the world, more generally, as our drawing pad. And, our body with blue sand is our pencil--like a pencil with a mind of its own--drawing a hand.

BH: With a back pack full of colored sand, we can draw anything we want and virtually anywhere we like. We walk and leave a trail like Hansel and Grethel in the wood. Hmm...I like to think of us as adult versions of little boys that write their name in the snow while they pee. We have a broader agenda, more



waste, and a grander view.

GS: Look! There is a spider on the outside of this window! Ha! Spiderman! Nearly a quarter of a mile in the air and there it builds its web. She's an artist, don't you think...living at the top of the world with nothing to eat and nowhere to go?

BH: Enough already! You're making me feel queasy.

EPP: So drawing for you is the walking, talking, the...

GS: Right. And, in a material sense, what's left of our performance is the residue of sand we leave, the image we have drawn as seen from overhead, and our video close-up of the freshly laid blue line.



BH: But Gerry, there is the mental piece too.

GS: Oh...thanks. Let me tell you about a drawing from last winter in which we both attempted to sign our names on a frozen lake in South Dakota. These signatures were large (nearly a mile long) and very difficult to do. Days before starting, I signed my name over and over on a piece of paper trying to memorize the nuances of each letter--the rhythm and verve that makes my signature unique. However, it took little time once I got started to discover that an exact replication would require from me immense concentration and control. I was trying to translate a mental map of image and, more importantly, of feeling through a medium that couldn't respond adequately. Like trying to sing in slow motion. An autograph is an autonomic act--a well rehearsed dialogue between one's brain and body. That's what creates its identity. It really is like music. When I was finished, my signature looked like it was done by a child first learning to write. I am only now beginning to understand just how complex the act of drawing really is.

BH: For me, there is also the mental experience of being in the moment of making the mark that I like in our projects. It is Zen-like. Sand hitting the snow. The wavering line that...

GS: ...indexes analogically...

BH: Yes, the movement of my body as I walk...all the stuff that occurs in drawing but which is only noticed when it is experienced with a very close look in slow motion. We use the video portion of these performances to capture some of this experience. And there is the audio too, of course. It adds another dimension to the videos.

GS: The audio offsets some of the sensory deprivation and dislocation of the videos.

EPP: Looking at the video tapes is very interesting. It seems that these passing lines are timeless. Even when you video tape these lines in New York City.

BH: This is why I like the videos, too.

EPP: What projects do you have planned?

BH: Well, do you know the eleven calligraphic flourishes of Durer's in Polke's late 80's paintings? The paintings that he showed at the Venice Biennale several years ago? I like this idea of Polke's so much. You know, these are from the period of Emperor Maximilian I--the late 15th century. Polke's use of Durer's drawing makes them seem timeless in an historical sense. This is something that we want to try, too, by drawing one of these flourishes on a monstrous scale in the Mojave Desert, another on the Utah salt flats.

GS: And another on the Death Valley floor. The eight will be drawn in other similar sites.

EPP: What about the project for our Institute?

GS: I have, for some time, been wanting to make some drawings that use the old practice of anamorphosis. Our plan here is to draw on the sides of several large hills southwest of Vegas. We don't as yet know what we will draw, but they will be special images that can be seen in correct proportion when viewed directly overhead. It will be a crazy thing to draw.

BH: This will be the first time that our path will be controlled by a third person. So, to look at the video means to look at something that is controlled by someone who looked at it...like a third eye.

GS: This is not in an abstract sense. This third person will control our movements through a triangulation that we will set up between a geocentric satellite over our site, the real-time images sent from the satellite to this third person, and their conversations with us by cell phone. I guess that makes it a doubled, upside-down V, doesn't it?

EPP: Is there any end?

BH: There are other colors, other materials, other drawing proposals, other involvements. The whole universe needs to be drawn over and over.

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